

PROFESSOR SATYA VRAT SHASTRI

DOWN THE MEMORY LANE

*LECTIO DOCTORALIS*

Honourable Rettore Ezio Pelizzetti, Honourable Prorettore and President of Cesmeo Sergio Roda, Honourable Dean of the Faculty of Lettere e Filosofia Lorenzo Massobrio and the Academic Community of the University of Torino, particularly the friends Professors Stefano Piano, Mario Piantelli, and Dr. Mrs. Irma Piovano Director of the Cesmeo, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel greatly honoured to be with you this afternoon and to receive from the University of Torino, one of the most prestigious educational institutions of the world, the Laurea Honoris Causa.

I have all along been a silent worshipper at the shrine of Sarasvati, the Goddess of Learning, trying in my humble way in all seriousness to fulfill the twofold primary functions of a teacher, viz., creation and dissemination of knowledge.

Being the son of a master grammarian of Sanskrit affectionately called Abhinava-Panini, Modern Panini, the reincarnation of the matchless Sanskrit grammarian of the 6<sup>th</sup> cen. B.C., I was introduced to the most intimate secrets of Sanskrit grammar at a very young age. Poetry came to me by instinct, there being no tradition of it in the family. When I was hardly 11+ my first Sanskrit poem had been published. The editor of the magazine in which it had appeared had mentioned the fact of my age in the editorial note under the caption of the said poem. That was the sprout that was to grow into a big tree over the next decades leading to the appearance in it of a number of branches, twigs and leaves in the form of several Mahakavyas and Khandakavyas, poems, big and small, epic and narrative, comprising well over seven thousand stanzas of my composition winning me scores of Awards and Honours, national and international. All of my poems have been translated in some language or the other, one among them, the Sriramakirtimahakavyam dealing with the Thai version of the Rama story having been translated in eight languages, three foreign; Thai, English and French and five Indian; Kannada, Hindi, Assamese, Tamil and Telugu. In original Sanskrit it has run into three editions of a thousand copies each which is a record of sorts for any modern Sanskrit work.

Long time back I had published an article “The Making of a Poet”. In this I had discussed the dual entity and the two worlds of a poet, one the transitory world of matter and motion, limited by time and space, where he lives with his gross body and the other, the eternal world of beauty and bliss under the eternal canopy of imagination where he lives with his beauteous body of imagination and aesthetic experience. The poet himself is the creator of his aesthetic world and he is the absolute authority there to create things the way he likes.

In the concluding part of the article I had written that a poet is never made, he is not fashioned with the amalgam of disparate elements. He is self-made. The Sruti rightly describes him as Svayambhu. When I look back I feel how true it is. A young boy writing a poem with no knowledge, not even the consciousness of poetic appurtenances !

The two streams of creative and critical composition have run parallel in my life with neither impinging on the other. While I have composed the long epic poems in the style of the master writings of old, I have published critiques like The Ramayana—A Linguistic Study, the first linguistic appraisal not only of the Valmiki-Ramayana but of any extant Sanskrit work and the Discovery of Sanskrit Treasures in seven volumes.

Memories come to me racing in my ripe old age but I would like to restrict them mostly to Italy to share with you some of my experiences in this beautiful country.

While walking down the memory lane I am reminded of the contact that India had with Italy ages back. Italy had always generally been represented in India by the word Rome just as it had been represented elsewhere because of the spread and the majesty of the Roman empire. Sanskrit dictionaries of ancient India throw up words like *ruma*, obviously derived from Rome, in the sense of a salt quarry: *ruma syal lavanakare*. It is on record that the Indians had learnt the art of quarrying rock salt from the Romans. There is deep imprint of Rome or Italy on the development of the science of astronomy in India as well. Varahamihira, one of India's most eminent astronomers, refers in his work to a Roman scholar—he does not give his name and calls him just Romaka, one from Romaka : *atha romakasiddhantam vicarayamah*, now we take up for discussion the views of Romaka.

The contact that India had with Rome or in other words Italy during the ancient and the medieval period has come down to the modern period as well. A number of Italian scholars have devoted their life time to the study and the interpretation of ancient Indian wisdom. Scholars like Gorresio, Tucci, Gargano and Oscar Botto, to mention only a few, have become legendary figures in this field. A number of their disciples are devoting themselves to pursuit of Indian studies, ancient and modern. Apart from Universities like those at Rome, Torino, Venice, Milan, to mention only a few, which have strong departments of Indology, there are institutions like the ISMEO in Rome and the CESMEO here in Torino which are rendering yeoman's service in re-interpreting and re-inventing age-old Indian wisdom. This has resulted in the publication of the Hindi-Italian Dictionary under the auspices of the University of Venice, and the Sanskrit Italian Dictionary under the auspices of the CESMEO. The CESMEO has many ongoing projects under its auspices. They are : the new translation in English of Gorresio's recension of the Valmiki – Ramayana, the critical edition with translation and detailed introduction of the Smṛti texts under the Corpus Iuris Sanscricum Series that has the patronage of the International; Associaion of the Union of Academies and the research journal the Indologica Taurinensia which has entered into its 39<sup>th</sup> years of publication and because of its excellence has come to be accepted by the International Association of Sanskrit Studies, the mother association for World Sanskrit Conferences as its official organ.

My own association with Italy and the city of Torino and its University of goes back to 1975. The occasion was the participation in the Second World Sanskrit Conference. It was my first debut outside India. The topic for my presentation in the morning session of the second day of the Conference beginning at 10.00 was “Synonyms in Sanskrit” where I had put forward the view with proper support of illustrations and expositions of commentators that what are listed in the lexica as synonyms are not really so and that there is difference, however subtle, in their meaning. In line with the statement of H.W. Fowler, the compiler of the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* that there are no two perfect synonyms in the English language, I had said that that there no two perfect synonyms in the Sanskrit language. I had taken up pairs of so-called synonyms and tried to bring out the distinction in their meanings and the causes and the factors that account for their being accepted as synonyms later. This was altogether a new approach to Sanskrit Semantics and it was not possible that it should not attract the widest notice. As per the Conference procedure I was allotted half an hour for my presentation followed by discussion for some fifteen minutes. This schedule my presentation upset completely. It caused an intense debate that went on for almost two hours. It virtually split the Conference into two, one section comprising such stalwarts as Suniti Kumar Chatterji, R.N.Dandekar, A.K. Warder and Oscar Botto strongly supporting me and the other section comprising such stalwarts as V. Raghavan and Alex Wayman opposing me equally strongly. By the time the session ended I had become a celebrity—from a non-entity to the one most talked about-- winning rare encomium from a scholarly giant like A.K. Warder. In the closing paragraph of my presentation I had said that it is only a specimen of the work that I have presented here and that I have material enough for a monograph. Referring to this Warder had said that all through his life he had held the view that there is difference in meaning in the so-called synonyms of Sanskrit But I had not the proof with me to substantiate it. This proof Satya Vrat Shastri has furnished in his presentation. He has said that it is only the specimen that he has placed before us and that he has material sufficient enough for a monograph. But monograph is a small work. I want him to write a big work and I also want to live long enough to see that work in print. One single presentation of mine had brought me on to the international stage. And that had happened here in Torino. You can, therefore, very well imagine my emotional connect with this city.

My second visit to Italy was in 1977. After attending the World Sanskrit Conference at Paris I had left for many countries of Europe like G.D.R., Poland and Hungary. My last stop was at Rome from where I was to catch a flight back to Delhi. Before proceeding on my European trip I had requested my esteemed friend Lakshman Prasad Mishra of the Department of Hindi of the University of Venice to fix an appointment for me with Prof. Tucci whom I was very keen to meet having heard so much about him. Accordingly he fixed the appoint for August 1, 1977 at 3.00 in the afternoon. He was kind enough to bring me to his house which was in the village San Polo dei Cavalieri nestling in the woods with their charming foliage. The village was at some distance from Rome, a very quiet and peaceful place, just the place for sages. Prof. Tucci and his gracious wife warmly welcomed me and Lakshman Prasad Mishra. In the course of the conversation Prof. Tucci told me that he has a good number of manuscripts that he had collected from

India, Tibet and Nepal which he would like to be critically edited in his life time and that he would need my help in this connection. He suggested that I collate their text and the introduction to them he and I write jointly. I was greatly touched by the proposal and the confidence he had in me.

The conversation then switched on to matters personal : How he was habituated to ignoring his physical pain and disability. It was only recently that a big stone had hit him while he was climbing a mountain. He suffered a fracture in the leg. He still was smiling oblivious of what had gone on with him. People thought that he was drunk. In the hospitam came to apply the plaster on his fractured led, he was the first to greet him with the wods 'how do you do' making him look in all wonder at him. To ignore his personal suffering has become a sort of habit with him, he said. When he was hardly fifteen all his ribs had got broken. They got all right later but in such a way that there is a joint in each one of them After narrating me all this he took me to different sections of his many-roomed villa where I could see the vast array of items, honours and awards, gifts and souvenirs, decoration pieces and scrolls from almost all parts of the world on display in all elegance giving the appearance of a veritable museum to the house.. For me it was an unfogettable experience. I felt transported to a new world as it were. The impression of my visit to his house was so deep that I tried later on to arrange my house also somewhat accordingly. Prof. Tucci had worked tirelessly and ceaselessly all his life to advance the frontiers of knowledge. His *La Storia della Filosofica Chinese Antica, Pre-Dingnaga Buddhist Texts from Chinese Sources, Doctrines of Maitreya(natha) Asanga, Indo-Tibetica* in seven volumes, *Tibetan Paintings and Scrolls* in three volumes, *Minor Buddhist Texts* in three volumes plus hundreds of scholarly articles are a standing testimony to it.

It is this eagerness to continue with his work even in advanced age and indifferent health that was prompting him to undertake a mighty project. And the project, as he told me was A study of the mausoleums of Swat in which he was engaged at that time. Among their many peculiarities that he had noticed was that they had three stones placed on them, one above the other. According to Prof. Tucci they represented the three Hindu deities Brahma, Visnu and Mahesa. The mausoleums carry on them the figure of the sun indicating thereby that people of Swat of the time were sun-worshippers. They also were in all probability horse worshippers, the mausoleums containing the remains of horses along with that of humans.

Prof. Tucci presented to me a photograph of his on my request, the last one with him, thanks to the unwillingness of his devoted wife not to allow him to tear it off All the rest of them he had destroyed.

It was a couple of hours I had been with Prof. Tucci. The shadows of the evening were lengthening. It was time for us to leave. Prof. Tucci gave us an emotional send off with the Sanskrit words : *bhavatam darsanena ativa prafullitam me hrdayam, punar darsanaya*, I feel extremely happy to meet you. Please visit us again. I was exceedingly happy too having met a scholarly colossus.

My next visit to Italy was in 1982 in connection with the meeting of the Hindi-Italian Dictionary Project which was held in Venice, the beautiful city of waterways, gondolas, Rialto Bridge, St. Mark's Basilica, Café Florian, the second oldest café in the world, the great palazzos on the Grand Canal and the array of artists ready to make sketches or caricatures, if you so wish, of the people.

It was the force of Venice or call it a chance, I had the occasion to visit this city again in 1988, six years after the previous visit. The occasion was the participation in the International Workshop on Health and Illness : A comparison of the Concept in India and Europe. The organizers had on their own assigned the topics to delegates to speak on. I was assigned the topic "Concept of Death in the Upanisads" Initially I was not very happy with it. It was too abstruse and abstract and rather too time consuming. The Upanisads constitute a large corpus to wade through which was not easy. Slowly I picked up courage and prepared a write-up which was to prove a big hit with the delegates, with every one of them asking for a copy of it putting the organizers to the onerous task of preparing photocopies of them with the machine running for quite a while.

In 1992 I attended the International Ramayana Conference at the invitation of the CESMEO in this very city of Torino. I remember how Prof. Botto had taken all of us, the delegates, who included my wife as well to a place high on the hills and hosting a sumptuous lunch with all the Italian delicacies. The Conference was also the occasion when the CESMEO had conferred on me the Golden Prize which has the signatures of Prof. Botto inscribed on it as the President of the CESMEO.

My next visit to Italy was in 2004 to attend the International Seminar on Currents of Spirituality : Hinduism and Christianity organized by the Centre of Interfaith Dialogue, International Mariapolis, Rome. I had at that time found time to see almost all the historical sites of Rome, including some that I had seen during earlier visits. I had also visited the Vatican city and was honoured to be received by the then His Holiness the Pope to whom I had presented my paper on "Christian Literature in Sanskrit" which is the first study of its kind.

I again came to Italy in October the same year to attend the International Conference on Religions and Sacred Mountains at Torino and the Sacred Mountains and Sanctuary of Crea up on the hill with its charming landscape the memory of which is still etched in my memory at the invitation of my esteemed friend Prof. Stefano Piano. On the Crea mountains I had met a young man who had become my constant companion during the trip explaining to me the various facets of Italian life, answering all my queries, informed or ill-informed. He would knock at my door early in the morning and then we would start off together. At the dinner table he would explain to me the different types of turfls and the fierce competition among the farmers to be the first to discover them and having discovered them keeping their discovery a secret !

And that had been my last visit to Italy. I am returning to this beautiful country now in 2012 after eight years and am very happy to meet old friends marking all the physical

changes that age has brought in them. While I am happy I am also sad to miss friends like Prof. Oscar Botto with whom I had developed an emotional relationship . He has left a void which will be very difficult to fill. The CESMEO he had founded will ever remain a standing monument to his sharp vision, intense dynamism and indefatigable energy. I am happy his erstwhile colleague Dr. Mrs. Irma Piovano is carrying forward this legacy with the same vision, dynamism and energy. So are his other pupils like Prof. Stefano Piano, Prof. Mario Piantelli and Dr. Pinuccia Caracchi who are enriching the world of letters with their valuable contributions

I have a special word for the academic community here which has distinguished itself with its highly creative and innovative contributions in diverse fields. And I thank attending professor Giuliano Boccali, President of the Italian Association of Sanskrit Studies, founded by Professor Oscar Botto in 1976.

Being a poet myself, I am specially attracted by the poetic compositions of poets of Italy which has a galaxy of them. Fascinated with their compositions I have started translating them in Sanskrit poetry. Quite a few of the poems of Dante and Montale I have already translated. Over a period I have a mind to bring out an anthology of them.

Before I conclude, I would like to express my hearty gratefulness for the great honour conferred on me. I take this as symbolic of your love and affection for me. I accept it in all humility and dedicate it to the further strengthening of Indo-Italian friendship.